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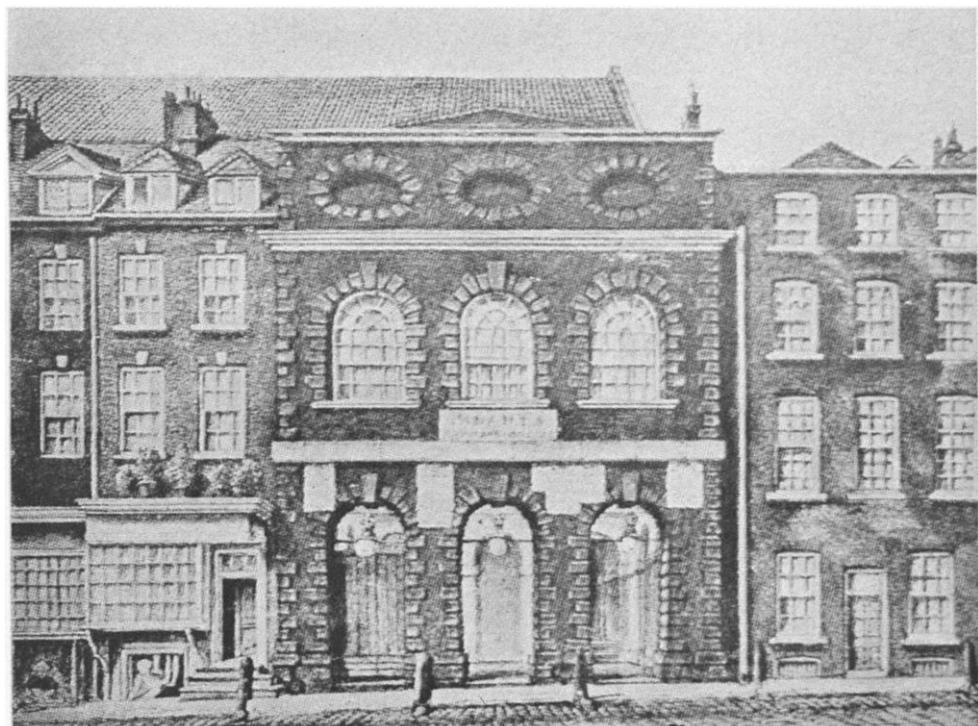
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THE EARLY YEARS OF THE FIRST ENGLISH OPERA HOUSE

By W. J. LAWRENCE

THE story of the slow, laborious emersion of Italian Opera in England, of its struggles to displace the hybrid monstrosity which for over a lustrum flaunted itself in its name, this, as it has been written piecemeal by various hands, is a tangled skein before whose complexities even the keenest expert might well stand aghast. Error crept insidiously into the tale at its first telling, and subsequent historians, in striving to dislodge it, have only succeeded in rendering confusion the more confounded. When one finds an alert mind like that which was labelled "Colley Cibber" blundering over dates and circumstances well within its individual observation and experience, confidence is shaken and it is difficult to know on whom to place dependence. To-day, despite our scientific methods of attack, we are too remote from events of a painfully evanescent order to be able always to arrest their flight and so fully to restore order out of chaos. But the more difficult the task the greater its fascination for the researcher; and it may not be wholly presumptuous for a lifelong delver into both the virgin soil and the well-tilled fields of English musico-dramatic history to attempt the blazing of a trail.

Accustomed as we are to speak of that landmark of the Augustan age, the old Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket, as England's first Italian Opera House, we are apt to forget that initially the term does not apply, and that in it for long opera was, in drummer's phrase, nothing more than an occasionally useful "side-line." Built in 1705 by Sir John Vanbrugh, architect by profession and dramatist by choice, the Queen's was primarily intended as habitat for the veteran tragedian, Betterton, and his associates of the little theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, who had found that their bandbox of a house hopelessly handicapped them in their uphill fight with the players of Drury Lane. Each camp in its endeavour to best the enemy had already fallen back on occasion on the adventitious aid of musical spectacle; and Vanbrugh as controller of the new house clearly foresaw that the same expedient would have to be resorted to. There was no idea in the beginning of the Queen's eventually becoming a substantive opera-house, and its ultimate transmutation was due, curiously enough, to a



View of the Front of the Old Opera House, Haymarket

Built by Sir John Vanbrugh

From an original drawing by Capon, made in 1783

determining combination of purely fortuitous circumstance. Its defectiveness, acoustically, for the speaking voice, together with the peculiarity of its location, fitted it better for an opera-house than a theatre, and an opera-house it became. On this score, Cibber is an excellent witness. Discussing the delusive prospects of Betterton's company just as they were on the verge of entering on occupation of their new home, Colley writes, in the ninth chapter of his *Apology* (1739):

As to their other dependence, the house, they had not yet discovered, that almost every proper quality and convenience of a good theatre had been sacrificed or neglected, to show the spectator a vast triumphal piece of architecture; and that the best play, for the reasons I am going to offer, could not but be under great disadvantages, and be less capable of delighting the auditor here, than it could have been in the plain theatre they came from. For what could their vast columns, their gilded cornices, their immoderate high roofs, avail, when scarce one word in ten could be distinctly heard in it? Nor had it then the form it now stands in, which necessity, two or three years after, reduced it to. At the first opening it, the flat ceiling that is now over the orchestra was then a semi-oval arch, that sprung fifteen feet higher from above the cornice: the ceiling over the pit too was still more raised, being one level line from the highest back part of the upper gallery to the front of the stage: the front boxes were a continued semi-circle to the bare walls of the house on each side. This extraordinary and superfluous space occasioned such an undulation from the voice of every actor, that generally what they said sounded like the gabbling of so many people in the lofty aisles in the cathedral. The tone of a trumpet, or the swell of an eunuch's holding note, it is true, might be sweetened by it; but the articulate sounds of a speaking voice were drowned by the hollow reverberations of one word upon another.

To this inconvenience, why may we not add that of its situation? For at that time it had not the advantage of almost a large city which has since been built in its neighbourhood. These costly spaces of Hanover, Grosvenor, and Cavendish squares, with the many and great adjacent streets about them, were then all but so many green fields of pasture, from whence they could draw little or no sustenance, unless it were that of a milk diet. The city, the inns of court, and the middle part of the town, which were the most constant support of a theatre, and chiefly to be relied on, were now too far out of the reach of an easy walk; and coach hire is often too hard a tax upon the pit and gallery.

Some idea of the troubles that lie in wait for the conscientious operatic annalist may be gained from a full exposition of the perplexing contradictoriness of the various early authorities as to the date of the opening of the new Queen's Theatre, and the fare presented on that occasion. Downes, who wrote nearest to the event (his serviceable *Roscius Anglicanus* appearing in 1708), and who is therefore the least likely to blunder, tells us that

Betterton, finding himself unequal to the struggle, now transferred his company over to Captain Vanbrugge, to act under him at the theatre in the Haymarket, and upon April 9th, 1705, the latter opened his theatre with a foreign opera, performed by a new set of singers arrived from Italy—the worst that ever came from thence, for it lasted but five days; and they being liked but indifferently by the gentry—they in a little time marched back to their own country.

Cibber, writing thirty years after Downes, begins badly by placing the date of opening in 1706, and then goes on to say that the initial bill proffered

a translated opera, to Italian music, called *The Triumph of Love*; but this not having in it the charm of *Camilla*, either from the inequality of the music or voices, had but a cold reception, being performed but three days, and those not crowded.

Along comes Burney to add to the intricacies of the problem. According to his "General History of Music," the date was Easter Monday, April 9, 1705, when an inaugural prologue written by Garth was spoken by Mrs. Bracegirdle, and the performance consisted of Dryden's tragedy of *The Indian Emperor*, together with singing by "the Italian Boy." Ashton¹, in condemning Downes' and Cibber's details, seeks to confirm Burney's statement in all but the dating, and relies on the fact that the first Queen's advertisement to be found in *The Daily Courant* deals with the performance of *The Indian Emperor* on April 14, 1705. This of itself is no proof, since Vanbrugh undoubtedly placed his dependence at the outset purely on bills supplemented by the obvious attractions of a new theatre.

Finally, Michael Kelly, in the handy synopsis of early operatic records given in an appendix to the second volume of his *Reminiscences*, contributes still further to the tangle. While agreeing with Burney as to the date and the prologue, he states that the production was "Signor Giacome Greber's *Loves of Ergasto*, set to Italian music."

Notwithstanding this extraordinary diversity of opinion, it becomes apparent on probing the matter to the bottom that the truth can be arrived at by fusing Downes' and Kelly's statements. The date of opening was certainly Easter Monday, April 9, 1705. *The Triumph of Love*, to which Cibber pins his faith, was not produced until the following July, when it was given at the deserted theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, not in the Queen's, whither Betterton and his associates had temporarily returned, but with

¹*Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne*, 1882, II, p. 7.

indifferent success. Sir Samuel Garth undoubtedly wrote the inaugural prologue, and Congreve the dramatist (who was associated in the beginning with Vanbrugh in the management of the theatre, but retired after the first season), the epilogue. As neither address has been reprinted by any operatic annalist, and as Congreve's epilogue¹ helps materially to solve the problem, I reproduce both:

PROLOGUE BY SIR SAMUEL GARTH, SPOKEN AT THE OPENING OF THE
QUEEN'S THEATRE, HAYMARKET:

Such was our builder's art, that soon as nam'd,
This fabrick, like the infant-world, was fram'd.
The architect must on dull order wait,
But 'tis the poet only can create;
None else, at pleasure, can duration give,
When marble fails, the Muses' structures live.
The Cyprian fane is now no longer seen,
Tho' sacred to the name of love's fair queen.
Ev'n Athens scarce in pompous ruins stands,
Tho' finished by the learn'd Minerva's hands.
More sure presages from their walls we find,
By beauty founded,² and by wit design'd.
In the good age of ghostly ignorance,
How did cathedrals rise, and zeal advance?
The merry monks said orisons, at ease,
Large were their meals, and light their penances;
Pardon for sins was purchas'd with estates,
And none but rogues in rags dy'd reprobates.
But now that pious pageantry's no more,
And stages thrive, as churches did before,
Your own magnificence you here survey,
Majestick columns stand where dunghills lay,
And cars triumphal rise from carts of hay.
Swains here are taught to hope, and nymphs to fear,
And big Almanzors fight mock Blenheims here.
Descending goddesses adorn our scenes,
And quit their bright abodes for gilt machines.
Shou'd Jove, for this fair circle, leave his throne,
He'd meet a lightning fiercer than his own.
Tho' to the sun, his tow'ring eagles rise,
They scarce cou'd bear the lustre of these eyes.

Read side by side with Cibber's strictures on the architectural deficiencies of the house, Garth's strophes assume an ironical flavour. With relief one turns to the

¹Not elsewhere to be found, I think, save in a little book entitled "Prologues and Epilogues celebrated for their Poetical Merit," published at Oxford, without date.

²Referring to the fact that the foundation stone had been laid in 1704 by the beautiful Lady Sunderland, popularly known as "the little Whig."

EPILOGUE AT THE OPENING OF THE QUEEN'S THEATRE IN THE HAYMARKET, WITH AN ITALIAN PASTORAL. WRITTEN BY MR. CONGREVE:

Whatever future fate our house may find,
 At present we expect you shou'd be kind:
 Inconstancy itself can claim no right,
 Before enjoyment and the wedding night.
 You must be fix'd a little ere you range,
 You must be true till you have time to change.
 A week at least; one night is sure too soon:
 But we pretend not to a honeymoon.
 To novelty we know you can be true,
 But what alas! or who, is always new?
*This day, without presumption, we pretend
 With novelty entire you're entertain'd;*
*For not alone our House and Scenes are new,
 Our Song and Dance, but ev'n our Actors too.*
 Our Play itself has something in't uncommon,
 Two faithful lovers, and one constant woman.
 In sweet Italian strains our Shepherds sing,
 Of harmless loves our painted forests ring,
 In notes, perhaps less foreign than the thing.
 To sound and shew at first we make pretence,
 In time we may regale you with some sense,
 But that at present were too great expence.
 We only for the beaux may think it hard,
 To be to-night from smutty jests debar'd:
 But in good breeding, sure, they'll once excuse
 Ev'n modesty, when in a stranger muse.
 The day's at hand when we shall shift the scene,
 And to yourselves shew your dear selves again.
 Paint the reverse of what you've seen to-day,
 And in bold strokes the vicious town display.

Not only the heading of the epilogue, but the lines specially italicised, as well as much of what follows, negatives the possibility that the Queen's could have opened with *The Indian Emperor* or any other old play. Congreve's reference to "two faithful lovers, and one constant woman" established the accuracy of Michael Kelly's statement, for these are characteristics of the plot of *The Loves of Ergaste*, an Indian pastoral printed in 1705 alternately in Italian and English¹ (undoubtedly for sale in the theatre), as "represented at the opening of the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket" and as "compos'd by Signior Giacomo Greber."

¹Burney says the date of the production of this pastoral was April 24, 1705, when the character of the nymph, Licori, was sustained by "the Italian Boy" and the bill also comprised a new farce called *The Consultation*. But since the anonymous Italian youngster had sung separately on the 14th previously, he might have suspected that the pastoral, or at any rate some sort of exotic musical production, had been given earlier.

Greber, it may be noted, was a German musician who came to London in 1692, bringing with him the celebrated Francesca Margherita de l'Epine, the first Italian vocalist of any distinction who sang in England.

All this sifting of evidence has been distinctly worth while, as the upshot brings us face to face with a remarkable fact. It was in keeping with the eternal fitness of things that the future home of Italian Opera should open with a pastoral piece sung entirely in Italian by Italian artists. That such homogeneity was not to be experienced there again until the production of *Almahide* in January, 1710, was due to a question of ways and means. Vanbrugh's initial experience had shown that the cognoscenti were not to be fobbed by an association of mediocre singers, and the difficulty and expense of bringing a first-class combination from Italy proved for long an insurmountable barrier. Nothing better than an ugly compromise could be effected. The attractions of a male soprano of the first or second order were eked out by the more or less competent singing of home-born artists, many of whom were incapable of dealing with any language save their own. Hence that arid lustrum in which, in the well-known words of Colley Cibber, Italian Opera masqueraded

in as rude a disguise, and unlike itself, as possible; in a lame, hobbling translation into our own language, with false quantities, or metre out of measure to its original notes, sung by our own unskilful voices, with graces misapplied to almost every sentiment, and with action lifeless and unmeaning through every character.

The bad impression made at the beginning by a foreign troupe of incompetents was consolidated immediately afterwards when Betterton's players came to act at the new house and its acoustic defects became fully apparent. It was a case of give a dog a bad name and hang him. Patronage proved lukewarm, and a painfully dull season ended in June.

Just here I may say that questions of space preclude the possibility of my dealing with the theatrical records of the Queen's save in a superficial, glancing way. But it will remain for the ultimate historian of Italian Opera in England to assemble both the musical and the dramatic annals in order that the sense of proportion may be attained.¹

With the reopening of the Queen's on October 30, 1705, Vanbrugh's excellent new comedy, *The Confederacy*, saw the light.

¹See Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration to 1830*, Vol. II, for satisfactory summaries of the theatrical seasons at the Queen's.

It was given ten times, but not to the overflowing houses its merits demanded. Three other new plays followed in quick succession, and on February 21, 1706, there was a notable production of Lord Lansdowne's tragedy with florid musical embellishment, *The British Enchanters, or No Magic like Love*, a reversion to the Post-Restoration type of English dramatic opera, which met with considerable success and was afterwards revived in reduced and more strictly operatic form. Next in order came, on March 7, Motteux's pastoral opera, *The Temple of Love*, a translation from the Italian sung to music by Saggione. Unless a later addition, the following allusions in the epilogue seem an "intelligent anticipation" of the Drury Lane production of Marc Antonio Bononcini's *Camilla*, which did not materialise until the penultimate date of the month:

Get some fam'd Opera, any how translated,
No matter, so the t'other House don't get it.
Get clothes, tho' the Actors with half-pay dispense;
Get whims, get anything but Sense.

It is noteworthy that Owen McSwiney, the Drury Lane manager's factotum, who had translated the libretto of *Camilla* from the Italian of Silvio Stampiglia, was soon to be identified with the fortunes of the Queen's Theatre.¹ The production itself was remarkable for two circumstances, first for the appearance of Signor Valentini (Valentini Urbani), earliest in order of the male soprani, a singer of the second rank, with a weak but melodious voice; and again for establishing the absurd system of bilingual interpretation which, despite the girdings of the wits, so long obtained. Other countries, however, for similar economic reasons, had been compelled to resort to the same expedient. If Riccoboni is to be believed, when Italian opera was first produced in Hamburg, the recitative was given in the home tongue, whilst the airs were sung in Italian.

By way of countering the attractions of *Camilla* at Drury Lane, Vanbrugh, on April 5, brought out Tom D'Urfey's fantastic comic opera, *Wonders in the Sun, or The Kingdom of Birds*, which may be pithily described as a Jules Verne tale with a spice of Rostand's *Chantecleer*. Barring an air by Eccles, the music was all old, compiled from a variety of sources, even Lully being laid under contribution. According to Whincop "it had several ballads in it that took very much with the common

¹For details of McSwiney's adventurous career, see my article, "A Famous Wexford Man," in *The New Ireland Review* for August, 1908.

people," but although given five or six times, it was not successful enough to establish the vogue of ballad opera. The necessary impulse for the creation of that long-popular genre was lacking until Gay's satiric genius afforded it in *The Beggar's Opera*.

At the close of his second season, Vanbrugh, disappointed in his expectations and wearied with the cares of management, leased the Queen's to Owen McSwiney at a rental of £5 per acting day, the total sum not to exceed £700. To this arrangement Christopher Rich, the astute Drury Lane Manager, made no objection, feeling assured that his old lieutenant, who was heavily in his debt, would remain subservient, and that the upshot would be his own control of both houses. Hoping to hoodwink both players and public, he secretly agreed to the enticing away by McSwiney of the principal members of his company, only to find when the manœuvre had been effected that his quondam satellite had played him false and intended fighting for his own hand. Thenceforth between the two it was war to the knife.

Opening the Queen's on October 15, 1706, with the Drury Lane players, McSwiney was for a time too hampered by lack of means to compete with Rich on operatic lines. All the signs of the hour gave delusive indications that Drury Lane, and not the Haymarket house, was to be the future home of Italian Opera. The vogue there of the hybrid makeshift was trenchantly girded at in Addison's prologue to Smith's tragedy, *Phædra and Hippolytus*, as brought out by McSwiney on April 21, 1707. Doubtless some impetus to the rage for the exotic had been given by the performance at court of *Camilla*, in celebration of the Queen's birthday, a couple of months previously. Anne never condescended to visit the playhouses, and, since Mahomet refused to go to the mountain, the mountain at long last had to be brought to Mahomet. Forced by the defection of his players to make strenuous appeal to his patrons' musical instincts, Rich brought out Motteux's *Thomyris, Queen of Scythia*, one of several futile attempts made about this time to establish a piratical school of English grand opera, based on Italian groundwork.¹ McSwiney could only respond by producing a new play or two, and, after missing fire with Mrs. Centlivre's *Platonic Lady*, scored a remarkably happy hit with Farquhar's fine comedy, *The Beaux' Stratagem*.

Precisely at this juncture Fate willed it that an exchange of weapons should take place. A certain Colonel Brett, having become possessed of an interest in the Drury Lane patent, forced

¹For the characteristics of this pasticcio, see O. G. Sonneck, *Catalogue of Opera Librettos printed before 1800*, p. 1072.

himself resolutely into partnership with the scheming Rich, and seriously disturbed the equanimity of that despot by treating the players as creatures of flesh and blood. Not only that, but having arrived at the conclusion that two playhouses were in excess of the requirements, Brett petitioned the Lord Chamberlain to enforce an amalgamation of the rival companies. The result was that the players were one and all commanded to betake themselves to Drury Lane, McSwiney, as a solatium, being awarded a monopoly of Italian opera at his house from January, 1708. As will shortly be seen, however, this attempt to establish a regular Italian Opera House, important as was the outcome, proved abortive.

In his new rôle of impresario (the first time anybody had ever sustained it in England), McSwiney reopened the Queen's on January 14, 1708, and proceeded to give operatic performances twice a week by subscription. Then, and for some time afterwards, no more than 400 tickets were issued for the fashionable parts of the house, the pit and boxes, which were both at the one price, but McSwiney's custom of asking for subscriptions for the first six nights of each new opera was afterwards abandoned in favour of subscriptions for the entire season. Prices ruled high, and opera-going was a luxury that only the rich could afford. At best, McSwiney could do little more than mark time while elaborate preparations were being made for his Italian opera campaign, and the season which ended on May 28,¹ yielded but little novelty. No particular attraction was proffered until the end of February, when Motteux's pastoral opera in three acts, *Love's Triumph*, translated from the "book" of Cardinal Ottoboni, and sung to music by Carlo Cesarini Giovanni, *detto* del Violone, and Francesco Gasparini, was given eight times. Only about a fifth of the opera was sung in the original Italian. Motteux was an indifferent writer of lyrics, and his libretti were strewn with most of the absurdities so lucidly animadverted upon by Addison in the 18th *Spectator*. It is noteworthy that Valentini, who made his first appearance at the Queen's in this production, had arranged all the choruses with dance accompaniments, after the French manner, the idea being to see whether British liking leaned to the French or the Italian style. For his work he was given a benefit on the last night of the opera.

¹About which time we find Vanbrugh writing to Lord Manchester, "I have parted with my whole concern (the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket) to Mr. Swiney, only reserving my rent, so he is entire possessor of the Opera, and most people think will manage it better than anybody. He has a good deal of money in his pocket, that he got before by the acting company, and is willing to venture it upon the singers."

McSwiney now demonstrated his enterprise by bringing over the first great Italian star to set foot on English shores. This was the celebrated Cavaliere Nicolino Grimaldi, professionally known as Nicolini, a Neapolitan castrate, whose reputation was already so assured that no foreign triumph could add to its lustre. Salaries in Italy were not then of any particular munificence, and itinerating singers had not yet grown exorbitant in their demands. Consequently Nicolini closed with McSwiney's offer of 800 guineas for the season, a sum little better than half what was afterwards paid to artists in nowise his superiors. His delicious soprano voice, which changed later to contralto, was then in the heyday of its charm. Cibber, much as he disliked foreign opera and its exponents, had perforce to yield to the Neapolitan an extorted admiration:

Whatever praises may have been given to the most famous voices that have been heard since Nicolini, upon the whole I cannot but come into the opinion that still prevails among several persons of condition, who are able to give a reason for their liking, that no singer since his time has so justly and gracefully acquitted himself in whatever character he appeared, as Nicolini. At most the difference between him and the greatest favourite of the ladies, Farinelli, amounted but to this, that he might sometimes more exquisitely surprise us; but Nicolini (by pleasing the eye as well as the ear) filled us with a more various and rational delight.

Steele, who, as press agent to the Drury Lane players, was little disposed to do the foreign singer justice, unites with Cibber in his admiration of Nicolini. Writing in the 113th *Tatler*, he says:

For my own part, I was fully satisfied with the sight of an actor, who, by the grace and propriety of his action and gesture, does honour to the human figure. Every one will imagine, I mean Signor Nicolini, who sets off the character he bears in opera by his action, as much as he does the words of it by his voice. Every limb and every finger contributes to the part he acts, inasmuch that a deaf man may go along with him in the sense of it. There is scarce a beautiful posture in an old statue which he does not plant himself in, as the different circumstances of the story give occasion for it. He performs the most ordinary action in a manner suitable to the greatness of his character, and shows the prince even in the giving of a letter, or despatching of a messenger.

Nicolini made his English débüt on December 14, 1708, when McSwiney reopened the Queen's with his own version of *Pyrrhus and Demetrius*, "a noble entertainment" (in Steele's phrase), translated from the "book" of Adriano Morselli, and sung, partly in Italian and partly in English, to the combined scores of Alessandro Scarlatti and Nicolo Francesco Haym. The latter composer, who was then resident in London, contributed a new

overture and about twenty arias.¹ As Italian-singing coöoperators, Nicolini had Valentini, now deposed from his pride of place, but still popular, Margherita de l'Epine, an old favourite, and the mysterious German lady known as "the Baroness," who after acquiring her art in Italy, had come to England in 1706. The chief singers in English were Mr. Cook, Mr. Ramondon, and the beautiful Mrs. Tofts, then on the verge of her retirement. No such combination of lyrico-dramatic talent had ever been seen before, and it is not surprising that what with the compelling genius of Nicolini and the simple beauty of the arias, *Pyrrhus* and *Demetrius* proved a great success. Later on, there was a revival of the perennial *Camilla*, followed by the production of another new opera, *Clotilda*, and a remarkably prosperous season ended on May 20, 1709.

Every student of the story of the rise of opera in Italy knows how insistent there were the claims of spectacle, and with what alacrity they were responded to. Probably because scenic excesses of the sort in association with Post-Restoration dramatic opera of the type of *The Fairy Queen* had occasioned severe, well-remembered losses, managers were long loath to expend much money on the pictorial embellishment of its imported successor. Records are ominously silent upon the point until May, 1709, when a paragraph cropped up in the papers saying that "a new set of scenes painted by two famous Italian artists lately arrived from Venice" had been added to the Queen's theatre stock. Apart from the question of expense, there was another reason why elaborate scenery was for long eschewed. The end-of-the-century theatre practice of allowing certain well-mulcted spectators to sit on the stage and lounge about behind the scenes had spread itself to the opera, where the "buzzing mosquitos," as Cibber called them, occupied enclosures ranged along the wings in a manner indicated in Hogarth's picture of *The Beggar's Opera*. It is noteworthy in this connexion that when the four Iroquois Chiefs who visited England in April, 1710, were taken to the Queen's to see *Macbeth*, they were given seats on the stage so that the expectant audience might have full value for their money. The practice finally proved so offensive to singers and spectators alike that it was specially prohibited at the Opera by an order of George I, issued in December, 1729.

No sooner was Owen McSwiney on the crest of the wave than along came fell circumstance to throw him again into troubled

¹For him, see *The Spectator*, No. 258. He was an accomplished man of letters and wrote a *History of Music*.

waters. Wearied out by the purposeful intriguing of his wily co-patentee, Colonel Brett threw up the sponge and retired in high dudgeon from Drury Lane. Once more monarch of all he surveyed, Rich resumed his tyranny over the players, who, tortured beyond all endurance, made clamant appeal to the Lord Chamberlain. The result was that the standing theatrical order was annulled, leaving the players free to go whithersoever they pleased.

Without loss of a moment, Wilks, Dogget, Cibber and Mrs. Oldfield entered into an agreement with McSwiney whereby the whole five became joint managers and sharers in the Haymarket house, which was now to be run partly as a theatre and partly as an opera house; and this once concluded they set about altering the building with the view of remedying its defective acoustics. In the multitude of counsellors there is not always wisdom, *Holy Writ* to the contrary notwithstanding, and on opening the Queen's in September, 1709, the new syndicate showed its exquisite bad taste by sandwiching acrobatic feats between the acts of *Othello*. It was hardly to be expected that a governing board on which there was a plurality of players, and which had evinced so little reverence for Shakespeare, would be considerate in its attitude towards the foreign singers; and it is not surprising to find that there was considerable friction during the season. In January, 1710, came the first operatic production of note, the *Almahide* of Bononcini, sung entirely in Italian by Nicolini, Valentini, Cassani, Margherita de l'Epine, and Signora Isabella, otherwise Isabella Girardeau. Fearing unnecessarily that the public would weary of the exclusively foreign feast of showy, over-pretentious music, the management sought to temper the severities by giving vocal intermezzi, sung in English between the acts by Dogget, Mrs. Lindsay and Mrs. Cross. Notwithstanding the artistic offensiveness of this *mélange*, the opera bore fourteen repetitions, and by its success was instrumental in sweeping away the old mongrel type of performance. Writing a year later, Addison pretended that the public had grown tired "of understanding half the opera, and therefore to ease themselves entirely if the fatigue of thinking, have so order'd it at present that the whole opera is performed in an unknown tongue." But that was only Fanny's pretty way.

Of the precise nature of the friction between the controllers of the Queen's and the Italian singers we should know nothing were it not for the lucky preservation in the collection of Mr. Harrison Garside of Victoria, B. C., of an interesting handbill,

which, as it is now the oldest thing of the kind extant, we reproduce below. It reads as follows:

ADVERTISEMENT

Friday, March the 17th, 170⁹

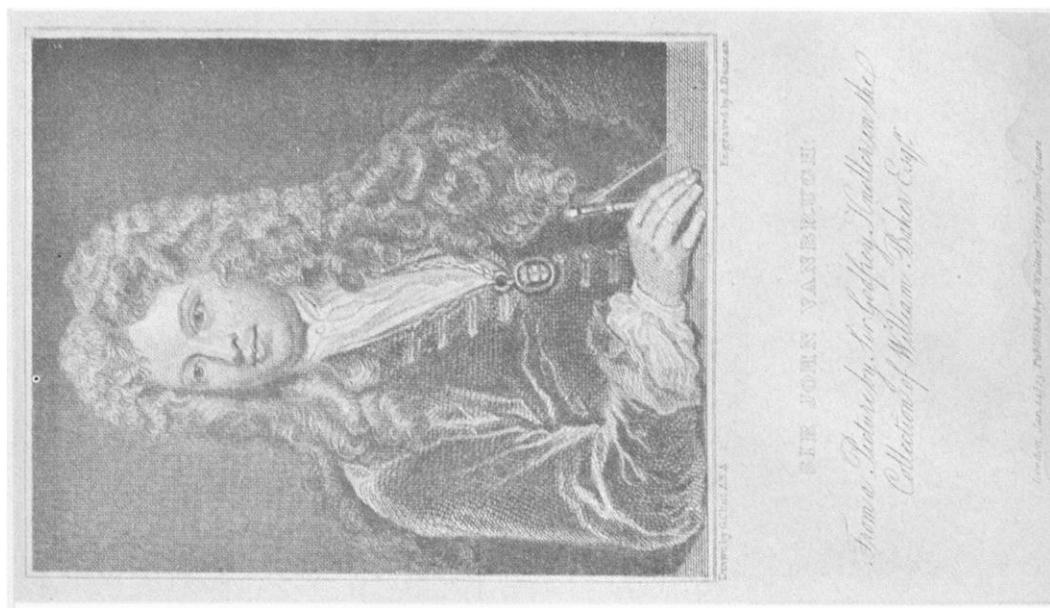
It has been publish'd in yesterday's *Daily Courant*, and last night in her Majesty's Theatre at the Haymarket, that to Morrow (being Saturday the 18th of March) will be presented there, a comedy, with several select scenes of Musick, to be perform'd between the Acts by Cavalier Nicolini, Signior Valentini, and Signiora Margarita; which sort of performance the said Cavalier Nicolini finding to be directly contrary to the Agreement made between him and Mr. Owen Swiny¹, and that the same wou'd prove a real means to vilifie and prejudice the Opera. He doth hereby acquaint all Gentlemen and Ladies, that his intention is strictly to observe the tenour and meaning of the said agreement, that is to say, to sing during the winter season only formal operas, and to be always ready to please and serve them according to his duty and usual custom.

Clearly, if the Haymarket players had no sense of the dignity of *their* art, Nicolini had a deep sense of the dignity of his!

On May 23 following came a noteworthy production of the *Hydaspes* of Francesco Mancini, in which Nicolini and his Italian associates had the coöperation of a capable English tenor singer named Lawrence, who was accomplished enough to be able to render their tongue. The curious will find an analysis of this romantic Persian opera (so amusingly satirised by Addison in the 13th *Spectator*), in Hogarth's *Memoirs of the Musical Drama*. Nicolini's fight with the property lion must have been a sight for gods and men.

Meanwhile there was much troubling of the waters at old Drury, where the turmoil was again to affect the fortunes of the rival house. On June 7, 1709, just as McSwiney had signed articles with the deserters, the Lord Chamberlain issued a mandate forbidding Rich to give further performances. Among the owners of Drury Lane at that period was one William Collier, a popular member of Parliament and *persona grata* in court circles. Exerting his influence, Collier gained permission in the following November to reopen the theatre under his own control, the understanding being that neither Rich nor any of his satellites were to have any further say in the management. Acting on this, Collier forcibly ejected Rich, who was living on the premises, and, with what players he could secure—mostly second-rate—

¹In deference to English susceptibilities (Irish patronymics being viewed with distaste), McSwiney had for some time dropped the "Mac" before his name, but he replaced it later.

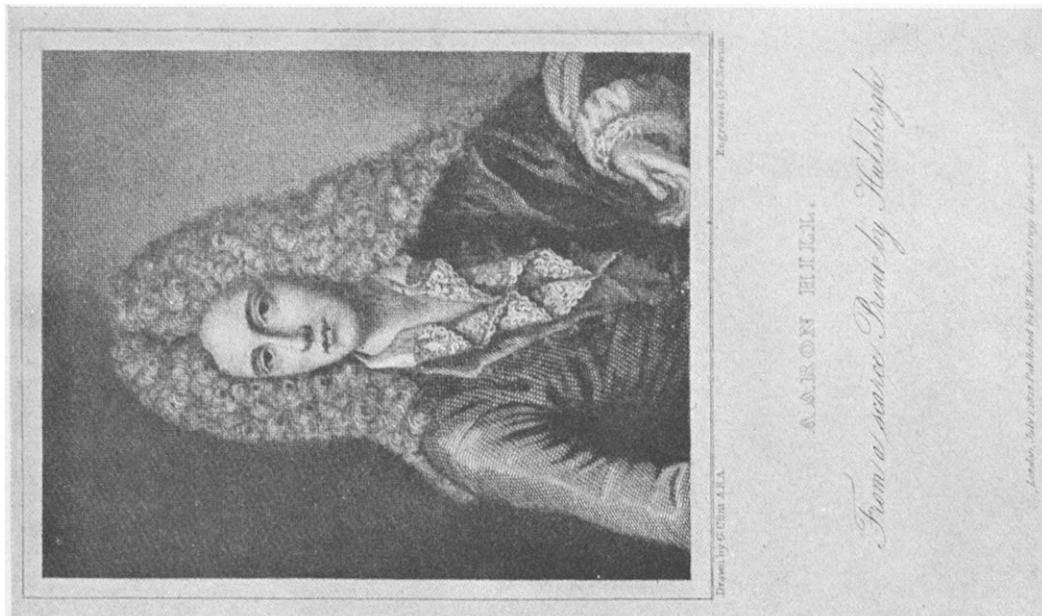


Engraving by J. D. Green

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AARON MELL.

From a Picture Painted by Halsbury
London, 1730. Printed for W. Miller, 1730. 12mo. 6s.



Engraving by J. D. Green

Engraving by J. D. Green

SEE JOHN YARMOUTH

From a Picture Painted by Halsbury
London, 1730. Printed by W. Miller, 1730. 12mo. 6s.

proceeded to open the house. His failure was a foregone conclusion, as it was not to be expected that an inexperienced manager with an inefficient company could compete with the strong and manifold attractions of the Queen's. Baffled in his schemes, he once more appealed to the Lord Chamberlain, and succeeded in effecting a very silly exchange. McSwiney and his joint sharers were peremptorily ordered to remove to Drury Lane, where they were to have the sole right to represent plays, and Collier was given a monopoly of opera at the Queen's. Allied with this was the curious understanding that whenever opera was given at the Hay-market house on Wednesdays, Drury Lane was to remain closed.

Collier, immediately on gaining possession of the Queen's, let the house to Aaron Hill, the dramatist, at a rental of £600 per annum, and the season opened on November 22, 1710, with a revival of *Hydaspes*. In the brief period he was at the helm, Hill proved himself an impresario of initiative and resource, and contrived to leave an indelible mark on the annals of early Italian Opera. He was the first to appreciate the potentialities of Handel (then languishing in obscurity in London), and to demonstrate that to procure good opera it was unnecessary to go the whole way to Italy. After thoroughly maturing his plans, he set about writing a libretto based on Tasso's *Gierusalemme*, and on its completion, handed it over to Giacomo Rossi to be translated into Italian. That was done, and the "book" given to Handel, who took his duties so lightly (there was no elaborate orchestration to worry over!) that the music was written in a fortnight. The result was *Rinaldo*, brought out with triumphant success on February 24, 1711. Whincop tells us that the maestro "then made his first appearance in England, and accompanied the voices himself on the harpsichord in the orchestre, and performed his part in the overture, wherein his execution seemed as astonishing as his genius." Thanks to the absorbing romantic interest of the theme, the beauty of the music and the splendour of the spectacle, *Rinaldo* was given uninterruptedly to crowded houses until the close of the season. In the judgment of many connoisseurs, Handel's first opera remains his best. Certainly a work which contained those delightful arias, "Cara Sposa" and "Lascia ch'io pianga" must be for ever memorable.

With the sacred name of Handel one must bring this proem to a close. It only remains to add that with the performance of Motteux's comedy, *Love's a Jest*, on August 31, 1711, the players took their farewell of the Queen's, and that thenceforth the theatre became a permanent opera-house.